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ALBERT  
THE KING OF THE BELGIANS

(See opposite page)

## ALBERT, KING OF THE BELGIANS

BY DR. HENRY VAN DYKE

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IN the light of the present times we may read a special significance in that title. His Royal Highness Albert is not described as the King of Belgium, as if his Majesty depended merely on the fact that he is the monarch of a certain country. He is called King of the Belgians, as if to mark his personal relation as the leader, friend and father of his people. The country in which they lived so happily and prosperously has been invaded, trampled, laid waste, depopulated by the ruthless armies of Germany. Of free Belgium nothing is left but a little strip of sodden land in Flanders and a narrow line of sand-hills beside the sea. Only one city, Ypres, remains, and that is a wreck. But the Belgian people are not conquered. They are still fighting in their last trenches. They are still enduring unspeakable hardships and cruelties in their violated land. And the king in their hearts, whether they are fighting and suffering, or just suffering, is *Albert Roi des Belges*.

When he succeeded to the crown on the death of his uncle Leopold II in 1909, comparatively little was known of the character and ability of the young prince. He was thirty-four years of age and had taken no active part in politics. He was of a quiet and studious disposition; modest and almost shy in manner, but very intelligent and always eager to learn every lesson that might help to equip him for his future duties; devoted to his wife and family, and so simple and sincere in all his ways that his personality was sympathetic without an effort.

King Leopold had been a masterful monarch. Immensely clever both as a ruler and a financier, he had steered his little country with great skill, so that it grew richer than ever before, and his own personal fortune increased proportionately. Perhaps it increased even a little out of proportion, for he was an adept in the games of the stock-market. Of his moral character the less said the better. King Leopold was much admired, but not respected or beloved.

When King Albert, the quiet Prince, came to the throne it was evident almost immediately that he had as much ability as his uncle and a far finer character. The colonial enterprise of Belgium was cleansed but not abandoned; her prosperity was advanced on a sounder basis; the jealousies and quarrels between the two elements of her population, Fleming and Walloon, were gently and wisely handled and brought toward the point of reconciliation; the reform of the mercenary army system was begun; the people of Belgium were better off than they had ever been.

Then came the crisis in 1914. The long-gathered storm of German military pride and fury broke loose upon Europe. Kaiser Wilhelm declared war against Russia and against France. He sent word to Belgium that it was *necessary* for his armies to pass through her territory in order to frustrate an imaginary attack which he asserted that France was preparing to make on Germany. But France had already given her word (and kept it) that she would not cross the Belgian frontier unless Germany violated it. The absolute neutrality of

Belgium was guaranteed by the treaty of 1839, of which Germany, France and Great Britain were signatories.

But William of Hohenzollern's proposition was this: "Let me disregard this treaty. Let me send my armies through Belgium against France. If you do this, I will guarantee the integrity of your kingdom and possessions. I will pay cash for everything my troops take or damage. I will be your friend. Otherwise I will fight and crush you on my way to Paris." This was the substance of Germany's note to Belgium on August 2, 1914.

What was the answer of Albert, King of the Belgians? You will find it in the note of August 3, 1914. "The Belgium Government, if it accepted the proposals which have been made to it, would sacrifice the honor of the nation and betray its duties toward Europe." You will find it in the speech which King Albert made to the parliament on August 4: "If the foreigner, in violation of the neutrality of which you have always scrupulously observed the obligations, invades our territory, he will find all the Belgians grouped round their sovereign, who will never betray their constitutional rights. I have faith in our destinies. A nation which defends itself commands the respect of all. Such a nation can not perish. God will be with us in a just cause!"

So the great decision was made. So amid the roll of thunder and the flash of lightning the quiet, gentle, thoughtful Albert was revealed to the world as a great hero, a born leader of brave and honest men.

The amazing resistance which the Belgians offered to the German forces in their proposed passage to Paris, to London (and perhaps ultimately to America) was undoubtedly the chief cause of the delay which broke up the plan of the Potsdam ruffians to dominate the world with the sword and impose their particular brand of *Kultur* upon unwilling nations. From that calamity the heroic and sacrificial fight of the Belgians in defence of their homes and their honor, defended the world. They lost their land, but they saved their souls and the cause of Freedom.

King Albert was the animating spirit and the central figure in that noble resistance. Driven from Brussels, he took refuge in Antwerp with his brave wife and their children. There they were nearly killed by a treacherous zeppelin raid. He was forced to move the seat of the government to Havre. But the King with the Queen beside him remained on the last acres of free Belgian soil that were left. There he is today, among the flooded meadows, the desolate sand-dunes, the ruined villages, still fighting for the soul of his people, still the hero-king of the indomitable Belgians!

Henry van Dyke

*Note.*—BRAEKEVELT, son of the well-known sculptor who died in 1908, was born in Brussels in 1866. He has exhibited at the Brussels and other exhibitions.

This is Braekvelt's second portrait of King Albert, the other having been painted before his accession to the throne of Belgium. The King is shown in a General's undress uniform, without decorations, and the "brassard" is the sign of mourning for Belgium.